

Should Christians Consider the Apocrypha Scripture?

Intro: This week in our reading Brother Smith in discussing the period between the historical events of the OT and the NT included an essay about “The Apocrypha”, a collection of books and supplemental scriptures not found in the modern English Bible but found in the Catholic, Orthodox, and other foreign language versions of the OT. What are these books and should Christians today consider them Scripture? Tonight we seek to answer some questions about “the Apocrypha” or the “deuterocanonical Scriptures”.

What books make up “the Apocrypha” and how did they get that designation?

To answer that question we need to know a little about the history of the Jewish Scriptures.

It appears that in the third century BC Ptolemy II, ruler of Egypt, commissioned a Greek translation of the Hebrew OT for the great library at Alexandria. This effort resulted in the “Septuagint” version of the OT, presumably based on the idea that 70-something (72) translators were used in its production.

The oldest copies that we have of the Septuagint version date to the 4-5th century AD. These include the well-known Codex Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus. In those copies one can find all the information that we presently find in our OT (that is, the scripture texts found in Genesis-Malachi).

However these copies of the LXX also contained a number of books and passages besides those found in our modern English Bibles. Included in these copies of the Greek OT were the following books and supplementary texts in addition to those found in our modern English OT:

1 Esdras

A number of additions to Esther

Judith

Tobit

1st Maccabees

2nd Maccabees

3rd Maccabees

4th Maccabees

Psalm 151

Prayer of Manasseh

Wisdom of Solomon

Ecclesiasticus or Wisdom of Sirach

Book of Baruch

Epistle of Jeremiah

Song of the Three Children placed between Daniel 3 & 4

Appended to the end of the book of Daniel: Story of

Susanna & Bel and the Dragon

These books appear to have been composed in the period from 200 BC to 100 AD.

It is unlikely that these books were a part of the original Greek translation from which these copies developed, since these books generally appear to have been composed in the period from 200 BC to 100 AD. It has been suggested by some scholars that these works were gradually added to the original LXX translation over time in the places where they best fit.

The early church inheriting the scrolls of the pre-NT era also became familiar with the apocrypha as well. Based on their presence in the LXX manuscripts, these books were also included in the Latin Vulgate and in English versions of the Bible, including the KJV of 1611 (though now modern additions of the KJV omit them).

However in more recent centuries these books and textual supplements have been excluded from most Protestant Bibles while being included in most Catholic, Orthodox, and other foreign language Bibles.

Thus, what Protestants often refer to as “apocrypha” (a word now meaning spurious or non-inspired) other religious groups simply refer to as “deuterocanonical” (“Second canon” in the sense that they are inspired but not fully recognized as those in the Bibles of both Protestants and Catholics.)

Should Christians cite “the Apocrypha” as Scripture?

First we must define what we mean by “scripture”.

By Scripture we mean writings that can be authenticated as coming direct from God by the moving of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21).

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

This concept is reflected in Paul’s statement about the OT Scripture:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

There are a number of criteria that it appears ancient Jews and Christians used in authenticating a writing as “inspired of God” and thus belonging to the category of “Scripture”.

Did the writing itself come from a known prophetic source (i.e. to someone on whom the Spirit of God had come) and be accepted as such by those into whose hands it passed? Does the book itself claim to be inspired (i.e., prophecy given by the revelation of the Spirit)?

Did others guided by the Spirit quote from or authenticate this book as inspired of God?

Is the book or text in harmony with other known revelation (particular God's "original" revelation in the Torah or Law and other prophetic message already authenticated)?

Let's apply these tests to the Apocrypha.

The Apocrypha was not regarded as "scripture" by the Jewish people.

Consider these evidences:

Jewish writers acknowledged the cessation of prophetic succession in the 5th century BC.

"It is true, our history has been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but has not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time." (Josephus).

The time of the cessation of prophetic succession is identified by Josephus as the Persian period, the same time during which the final prophets of the OT (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) were giving their revelations. And it is interesting that the final prophecy of the OT seems to anticipate a period of silence for God's breaking of the silence by the coming of an Elijah like forerunner!

"Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. (Malachi 4:4-5)

Hence the prophecy itself seems to suggest the absence of prophetic revelation from Malachi to the coming of John the Baptist!

Philo, Alexandrian Jewish philosopher (20 BC-AD40), quoted the OT prolifically and even recognized the three-fold division (Law, Prophets, Writings); but he never quoted from the Apocrypha as inspired.

Josephus (AD 30-100), Jewish historian, explicitly excludes the Apocrypha, numbering the books of the OT as 22. Neither does He quote these books as Scripture. His quote is important:

"We have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine..." (Against Apion 1.8).

These "twenty-two" appear to constitute the same material that make up our 39 OT books; but they certainly exclude the apocrypha.

Late in the first century (AD 90) the Jewish scholars meeting at Jamnia discussed questions relating to some books of the accepted OT canon, but did not recognize the Apocrypha as scripture.

*“There is no evidence that these books were ever regarded as canonical by any Jews, whether inside or outside Palestine, whether they read the Bible in Hebrew or in Greek” (F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 157).*

The apocrypha was not quoted as scripture by Jesus and His apostles.

Jesus and His apostles acknowledged the Jewish canon as it had been commonly collected in its three-fold division (Law, Prophets, Writings).

Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44)

It is especially important to remember that the NT writers quoted the Scriptures profusely to show the fulfillment and compatibility of the gospel with the teaching of the OT. There are over a 1000 quotations and references to the OT in the NT. Thirty-five of the thirty-nine books of the OT were quoted; and every major grouping of the OT canon is appealed to. Yet they never quoted from a single book of the OT Apocrypha. And this is all the more remarkable when we understand that the version that they commonly quoted from was the Greek OT! If those documents were a part of their Greek Bibles, why did they not appeal to them!

The post-apostolic church, though reading the Apocrypha, did not universally endorse it as “scripture”.

One of the earliest church “fathers” to compose a list of the OT books is Melito of Sardis who was a second century bishop of the church. His OT canon included only the books of our OT minus Esther and contained none of the apocrypha.

Jerome (340-420), the great scholar and translator of the Vulgate, rejected the Apocrypha as part of the canon. He disputed across the Mediterranean with Augustine on this point. He at first refused even to translate the Apocrypha into Latin, but later he made a hurried translation of a few of them. After his death, and literally “over his dead body”, the Apocryphal books were brought into his Latin Vulgate directly from the Old Latin Version.

It has been relatively recently that the Roman Church has officially endorsed the Apocrypha as canonical. Not until AD 1546, in a polemical action at the Counter Reformation Council of Trent, did the Apocrypha receive full canonical status by the Roman Catholic Church”. After including the apocrypha in the list of the OT canon the council decreed:

But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate

edition; and knowingly and deliberately condemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema. (Decree from the Council of Trent)

The Apocrypha contain information incompatible with other known inspired works.

Various chronological and factual errors have been found in the apocrypha in comparison with the scriptures.

The apocrypha contains doctrines contrary to the scriptures

Support the doctrine of purgatory and prayers for the dead

Pre-existence of the soul before birth

Atonement by the giving of alms

Conclusion: So then, by the criteria we originally suggested the OT apocrypha cannot be read as Scripture.

They were not originally authenticated as coming from prophets.

They were not accepted or endorsed by known prophets.

They do not claim to be inspired by God.

The information is not compatible with known divine revelation.

However, this does not mean that they cannot be read for what they are—writings of a historical and/or spiritual nature penned by those under the influence OT teaching; but not prophets of God. We should read them as we do all other uninspired works of men, attaining whatever value they may offer but always comparing them to the authentic Scriptures as the authoritative word of God.

Resources:

Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Josh McDowell

Jackson, “the Apocrypha: Inspired by God?”

Steve Rudd website: www.bible.ca